

By Jackie Kemp

Hens adore mushroom risotto. They are also keen on asparagus stems and the tops of strawberries. They are more curious than the cat and make a dash to get in the house whenever the back door is left open. Hens have a compelling stare, sometimes they jump on the kitchen windowsill and look down their beaks at me.

Like many in Britain, we recently enlarged our household by adding a trio of hens. Their eggs provide a source of relatively low-calorie protein and nutrient-rich food. If they are well cared-for and given a varied diet, they can produce eggs that are even better for you than shop-bought ones.

I asked scientists at Heriot-Watt University in Edinburgh whether they would analyse half-a-dozen eggs produced by my hens and half-a-dozen free-range ones from the big five supermarkets – and the results were astounding. They clearly showed that our eggs were significantly higher in protein and minerals. They appeared to have denser, heavier yolks, which is where most of the nutritional content of eggs is.

They are also markedly fresher and rewarding to cook with. In a blind-taste test at a dinner party, nine out of ten guests preferred the omelette made with our eggs, commenting that it was 'fluffy' and 'melted in the mouth'. The other – made with free-range supermarket eggs – was described as 'flatter', 'watery' and 'tasteless'.

Stephen Euston, research chemist in the life sciences department at Heriot-Watt, says: 'There are differences between the two samples which are statistically significant.' He said this could be because my half-dozen were almost certainly fresher even than supermarket eggs bought on the day of the test, or because of my hens' diet of household scraps.

This chimes with work published in the Journal of Renewable Agriculture showing that hens that forage on pasture produce eggs with twice as much omega-3 and 6 and Vitamin E as caged birds. Scientists at the US Department of Agriculture also concluded that backyard hen eggs were higher in protein and lower in cholesterol than commercial ones, and with a better ratio of 'good' to 'bad' fats. Most farmed hens, even free-range ones, eat dry pellets and, although they have more space than battery hens, do not roam as freely or eat the varied diet of garden hens.

Bruce Griffin, Professor of Nutritional Medicine at Surrey University (who keeps two hens in his garden) said diet could affect egg quality. 'It is well-documented that manipulating a hen's diet affects the content of the eggs,' he said.

Eating plenty of eggs was to be encouraged, he added. The British Heart Foundation no longer recommends sticking to just three a week – an egg a day is fine for most of us. 'Eggs are a great source of nutrition for children. But they may be equally valuable for the elderly,' it says.

They contain Vitamin B and D and are a good source of folate and calcium and contain iodine, choline, potassium and iron. Eggs are a low-calorie source of protein that is easy for the body to use. They also contain carotenoids, which help prevent age-related macular degeneration of the eye, a leading cause of blindness.

Keeping hens is a fun way of utilising leftovers –

when my children Mary, 14, Walter, 13, and William, nine, turn their noses up at something, I whip away their plates for the hens and each morning I boil up yesterday's peelings to make a mush for them. When the eggs mount up, I make quiche or lemon tart or boiled eggs with toast soldiers and feel confident that I am managing to smuggle good things into the family diet.

On the downside, producing your own eggs is not always a hassle-free business. Our three had been in the garden for a couple of days and laid only one egg between them when one developed a limp. I bundled her into the cat box to take her to the vet. Looking at the bedraggled creature, I asked about putting her down. The vet was horrified. 'I would never agree to put down an animal without

| Contents | JACKIE'S EGGS | M&S | ASDA | Sainsbury's | Tesco | Morrisons |
|--------------------|---------------|--------------|--------------|--------------|--------------|--------------|
| | Jackie's eggs | M&S | ASDA | Sainsbury's | Tesco | Morrisons |
| Moisture | 75.86 | 79.15 | 76.37 | 76.32 | 77.22 | 76.62 |
| Total Solids | 24.14 | 20.85 | 23.63 | 23.68 | 22.78 | 23.38 |
| Protein | 13.27 | 11.9 | 12.45 | 12.05 | 12.47 | 12.41 |
| Fat | 10.17 | 8.57 | 10.1 | 10.52 | 9.38 | 9.64 |
| Minerals | 0.9 | 0.8 | 0.87 | 0.82 | 0.78 | 0.85 |
| Total carbohydrate | 0.61 | 0.3 | 0.2 | 0.27 | 0.14 | 0.47 |

*Amount in grams per 100grams

had cost nearly £300. The fashionable 'eglu' – a modern henhouse – cost £180, the hens themselves were £10 each and bags of pellets and bedding were another £50.

Of course, it would be far cheaper and easier to buy our eggs from the supermarket. Hen-keeping is a mixture of pleasure and pain. We are on our second batch – after three months the hens succumbed to Fantastic Mr Fox. I dozed off one evening before putting them to bed and when I awoke it was dark and there was no sign of the birds. The next morning all I found was a few feathers on the grass.

Walter was phlegmatic. 'Well, Mum,' he said. 'It was a bad night for the hens – but look at it this way – it was a great night for the fox.'

Perfect Pins

With Gillian Reeves
Personal trainer

WEEK THREE:
SADDLEBAG SLIMMER

closer to your heart around your mid-section, it can be frustrating when it is difficult to fit into your favourite pair of trousers or jeans.

Here are two functional (and,

I hope, fun) exercises that will trim and tone areas of your legs that are similarly difficult to change.

This week, I have one that will recruit the muscles in the side of your leg as stabilisers – they are often used in this way during everyday activities, so you will have the added benefit of strengthening your body to make these easier.

As always, make sure your body is warmed up first and perform the following exercise after you have been active rather than after a long day sat down.

Begin by squatting down, bringing your arms behind you. Quickly jump forwards and land on both feet, making sure

your heels touch the ground. Once you are confident in performing this explosive movement on the ground, try jumping and landing on a step. Practise by standing close to the step before you jump on and then progress by moving further away, a foot at a time. This will recruit more stabiliser muscles in the outsides of your legs and involve your core also.

Perform ten to 15 repetitions and add in some cardiovascular exercise to your week such as power-walking or jogging to see the reduction in the size of your saddlebags.

● For information on personal training visit www.virginactive.co.uk



When Jackie Kemp had her hens' eggs analysed, the results were amazing. They beat supermarket free-range hands-down for protein and mineral content. And they made fluffier omelettes. No wonder her family think she's...

A good egg



1 The traditional Jane Fonda-style method of tackling flabby outer thighs – unkindly known as saddlebags – is the side leg lift. You know the type of thing, lie on the floor on one side, preferably dressed in your favourite pink Lycra leotard and leggings, and lift one leg up and down hundreds of times until you feel 'the burn'. Dull, dull, dull – and the worst news of all is that, although this exercise can be good for the core, it is totally useless for toning the legs.

Saddle bags make more of my clients miserable than perhaps any other body area.

And while it is preferable from a medical point of view to store fat tissue here rather than

